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ABSTRACT

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLS and NNS) represent a major government initiative to improve classroom practice and pupil learning in literacy and mathematics in primary schools across England. National targets were intended to increase the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching Level 4 in annual assessments for English and mathematics. This is the third of three annual reports by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) on NLS and NNS. This executive summary considers value for money in the funding of NLNS and on the perception and experience of the Strategies in schools. It also discusses successes of the program, such as the influence on the teaching and learning of literacy and mathematics and establishing a national infrastructure. Challenges such as teacher capacity, embedding accountability and capacity building, and manageability for local education authorities (LEAs), are also explained. (PM)

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Executive Summary: Final Report

Watching & Learning 3

Final Report of the External Evaluation of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLS and NNS), taken together, represent a major government initiative to improve classroom practice and pupil learning in literacy and mathematics in primary schools across England.
The Strategies, comprehensive in design and execution, have pulled together various policy strands to provide clear direction and support for change, with new roles, high quality materials and strong political support. National targets were intended to increase the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the "expected level" – Level 4 – in annual national assessments for English and mathematics. The strong accountability system established by the previous government was continued, with the current government adding focus, support and capacity building. The Strategies represent a highly ambitious professional learning programme that has involved virtually all primary schools in England.

The main elements of the NLS and NNS initiative are: a national plan and infrastructure for literacy and numeracy (with actions, responsibilities and deadlines); a substantial investment (skewed toward regions and schools that need most help); detailed teaching programmes for children from ages 5 to 11, with the expectation of a daily lesson in each of English and mathematics; a professional development programme for teachers; early intervention and catch-up for pupils who fall behind; and appointment of over 300 consultants for each of literacy and numeracy at the local level, plus the identification and part-funding of hundreds of leading mathematics teachers and expert literacy teachers. Regular monitoring and evaluation allowed early identification of problems and provision of solutions or modifications as appropriate.

The Standards and Effectiveness Unit (SEU) of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned a team of researchers centred at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) to provide an external evaluation of the implementation of the Strategies. This evaluation supplemented the assessments of classroom and school practice carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). In this final report, we summarise the key findings of our four years of data collection, articulate what NLS and NNS have added to the knowledge base about large-scale reform and draw out implications of our findings for future education policy.

The external evaluation team tracked progress in the implementation of the Strategies at the national and local levels. The team acted as a critical friend to SEU and the national directorates for the Strategies, describing NLS and NNS from different perspectives, making connections with the international literature on large-scale reform and identifying issues for attention. Can large-scale reform succeed? Is it possible to create a central government initiative that motivates educators to change their practice in line with the reform initiatives, provides them with opportunities to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills, and builds contexts that sustain the motivation and capacity for change? What does it take to reform something as large as a national education system? Finally, the most significant question is whether large-scale reforms can be sustained and can continue to evolve productively.

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The External Evaluation

The framework for our evaluation, developed during the first year of our work, highlights aspects of large-scale reform efforts that appear to make a difference in altering school and classroom practice, both at the central policy level and at school and LEA levels. Our methodology encompassed a range of data collection approaches including interviews with educators and policy makers, surveys of schools (headteachers and teachers), a survey of literacy and numeracy consultants in LEAs and repeated site visits to ten schools. Over the course of the study the external evaluation team spent 354 days in England gathering data.

We set out provisional findings and identified emerging issues in two earlier reports (Earl, Fullan, Leithwood & Watson, 2000; Earl, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2001). These reports showed that in comparison with initiatives in other jurisdictions, NLS and NNS are impressively comprehensive and highly developed large-scale reform efforts. Our first report focused on the "view from the centre" – looking at the design of the Strategies. The NLS and NNS initiatives were addressing each of the major factors that evidence suggests are important at the national policy level, some more completely than others.

In our second report, we broadened our focus to include the "view from the schools." We concluded that NLS and NNS were showing an impressive degree of success, especially given the magnitude of the intended change. Literacy and mathematics had moved to the top of the teaching agenda. Our data indicated that the majority of teachers were using many features of the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson; in other words, the structures of NLS and NNS were in place. In that report, we also raised a number of issues related to securing the long-term effectiveness of the Strategies. These included questions about depth of change in teaching practice, unintended consequences of the focus on targets and indicators, effects on other areas of the school curriculum, sustainability of the Strategies, availability and use of data, and a need to engage parents and families more fully in their children's learning.

In this, our final report, we build on and extend our earlier findings by considering the views from the centre, the schools, and what we have called "the bridge," which includes the regional directors and LEA staff linking the Strategies to schools and to initial teacher training institutions. Some early findings have been confirmed while others have emerged as the Strategies evolved and implementation proceeded. There is no question that the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies have made substantial changes in primary education in England in a remarkably short period of time. As with all large-scale change efforts, there are inevitable tensions, such as the appropriate balance between "top-down" and "bottom-up" reform, directed versus flexible implementation, literacy and mathematics versus other curriculum areas and long-term capacity versus short-term results. Our study also reaffirmed the importance of looking at a variety of outcomes and measures, given the unintended consequences of a focus on one indicator of success (in this case, the proportion of children reaching Level 4 in the Key Stage 2 national assessments).

The Strategies set out to transform the nature of primary schools throughout the country and in many ways have succeeded. Here we summarise what the data revealed as successes and challenges. Much has been accomplished and this should be celebrated. At the same time, a careful look at the progress of the Strategies reveals no shortage of challenges for the years ahead.

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Successes

Influence on the Teaching and Learning of Literacy and Mathematics

The Strategies have had some influence in virtually all primary classrooms in England; literacy and mathematics have become top priorities across the country. The Strategies have been generally well supported by schools, with the majority of teachers and headteachers reporting that they have implemented NLS and NNS in their classrooms. Almost all schools have received some training for both Strategies, and teachers believe their own learning has been positively affected. Initial teacher training has also increased its emphasis on the teaching of literacy and mathematics and now includes training in the Strategies.

The major shifts associated with the Strategies have been an improved range and balance of elements of literacy and mathematics being covered, increased use of whole class teaching, greater attention to the pace of lessons, and planning based on learning objectives rather than activities. Most teachers use the format and structure of the literacy hour and the daily mathematics lesson, although as they become more familiar and more comfortable with the frameworks and resources, teachers make adaptations to suit their pupils.

There is considerable evidence from a range of sources that teaching has improved substantially since the Strategies were first introduced. We observed many teachers who demonstrated awareness of the different levels of understanding of each of their pupils, establishing curriculum targets for individuals while attending to the whole class and ensuring learning for all. There is considerable variation across teachers and schools in terms of expertise, however, suggesting that the capacity-building task, much larger than initially anticipated, will require sustained professional learning experiences over many years if improvements in teaching practice are to be lasting.

It is more difficult to draw conclusions about the effect of the Strategies on pupil learning. Attainment on the government's key measures rose significantly even though the 2002 targets were not achieved. In 1997, 63% of children reached the expected level in English, a figure that increased to 75% in 2002. While still short of the target of 80%, this is a substantial gain. In mathematics, 73% of children reached the expected level, short of the target of 75%, but a considerable increase from the 61% of 1997. However, much of the increase occurred prior to the introduction of NLS in 1998 and NNS in 1999, while English and mathematics results have changed little since 2002. Regional directors, consultants and many headteachers and teachers are convinced that pupil learning has improved considerably with the use of the Strategies, with children showing increased understanding and skill in many aspects of English and mathematics. On the other hand, some headteachers and teachers expressed doubt, in particular about whether increases in test scores actually represented comparable increases in pupil learning. The gap has narrowed substantially between pupil results in the most and least successful schools and LEAs. If this improvement in low-attaining schools continues, it would be a significant measure of success.

Establishing a National Infrastructure

NLS and NNS national and regional directors provide leadership throughout the country, supporting and monitoring the work of LEAs and developing new initiatives in response to emerging issues. Regional directors oversee the development and distribution of national training and curriculum support materials[3]

within the National Centre for School Standards. The national infrastructure has been flexible enough to accommodate policy decisions and to meet changing local needs. The centrally directed agenda that characterised the initial phase of implementation has shifted to a more interactive approach, with regional directors facilitating the sharing of good practice across LEAs, schools and teacher training institutions. Expertise is located increasingly at the local level, with consultants, co-ordinators, and expert and leading teachers providing support to schools that need it. Such local strength also leads to a greater sense of ownership as schools and LEAs address challenges with increased confidence.

Having this infrastructure in place in LEAs and at the national level provides a substantial advantage for future work, while strength at the local level is essential for sustainability.

Flexibility within a Constant Vision

For NLS and NNS, the overall vision, as set out in the frameworks, has remained constant, although specific priorities and emphases have shifted in response to data about pupil strengths and weaknesses and to feedback from schools and LEAs. Strategy leaders have sought out, in a variety of ways, information about the progress and challenges of implementation and have adapted elements of the Strategies to address problems that arose. Achieving a sense of common purpose that persists through such adaptation is no small accomplishment and is a significant contribution to the sustained effort required for successful large-scale reform.

Value for Money

Many factors make it difficult to estimate the value for money of a large-scale educational initiative. At the outset of our study, we discussed a number of significant difficulties in conceptualising and measuring all the relevant variables. Nonetheless, we find, with regard to the Strategies, that a relatively small additional central expenditure (approximately 4.4%) has levered significant shifts in the use of schools' ongoing resources, such as teacher time and attention. Key Stage 2 test results, defined as the primary measure of success, have improved considerably since 1997, even though targets were not met. On balance, we cautiously conclude that the Strategies represent good value for money.

High Pressure and High Support

To be successful with a large-scale reform agenda in education, governments need to push accountability and foster capacity building among educators. Under the current government, initiatives such as a revised National Curriculum, target setting, annual national testing, the publication of "performance tables" of school results and monitoring of teaching and Strategy implementation provide intense pressure for accountability. We found from the beginning of our study that the NLS and NNS frameworks and curriculum materials enabled many schools to cope with the pressure of national tests, Ofsted inspections and national targets. The government has provided substantial support to schools, partly through increased funding, much of it to strengthen literacy and mathematics. The Strategies also have given strong support through high quality resources and training, with LEA literacy and numeracy consultants providing focused and sustained implementation support to many schools, as well as opportunities to keep up to date with Strategy developments. The differentiation of pressure and support to schools and LEAs has been an effective tool for managing resources and focusing on schools and LEAs most in need.

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Our conclusion is that the Strategies provide an excellent example of a "high pressure, high support" approach to large-scale reform.

Assessment Literacy and Use of Data

Teachers are developing greater assessment literacy, in particular the capacity to examine pupil work and performance data and to use such information to guide their teaching and improve pupil learning. Although teachers continue to be aware of numerical targets, such as the desired percentage of pupils reaching a particular level of performance, curriculum targets – specifying what pupils need to learn next – have become much more salient. NLS and NNS recognise that teachers' engagement in the careful consideration of pupil work is a powerful tool for professional development and for school improvement.

Increasingly, LEAs and schools across England are making appropriate use of relevant data for educational decision-making. LEAs collect evidence of various kinds to support educational development plans, resource allocation and teaching. Schools are becoming more comfortable using reports from DfES, Ofsted, QCA and other agencies, and are frequently using test data and other indicators of pupil, school and LEA performance in their planning. In many schools, the focus is shifting to the rates at which pupils progress, rather than the absolute level of pupil attainment. The more sophisticated use of good data offers a promising approach for ensuring continued growth in the quality of teaching and learning.

Leadership

Leadership at all levels of the Strategies has proven to be a notable strength and as the Strategies have evolved, the leadership focus has evolved with them. The emphasis has shifted from establishing a vision and encouraging commitment from all stakeholders to developing sustainability through a more interactive relationship with LEAs and initial teacher training institutions.

Although leadership in LEAs and schools varies considerably, we have observed many strong LEA and school management teams. Many schools are becoming learning communities, working collaboratively, making decisions jointly, and taking more collective responsibility for school self-evaluation. Recently, NLS and NNS have focused appropriately on developing school management and leadership capacity, through support tailored specifically for headteachers and for literacy and mathematics co-ordinators. The focus by Strategy leaders on strengthening the work of school leaders, both as managers and as models of good practice, is a powerful method for raising the quality of teaching and learning throughout schools. In addition, the newly established National College for School Leadership provides the potential infrastructure for ongoing improvements in the quality of school leadership.

Challenges

A number of issues have emerged from our consideration of the evidence available to the end of 2002. We hope that raising these issues will spark discussion about how to secure the long-term effectiveness of the Strategies and will contribute to international knowledge about large-scale reform.

Teacher Capacity

The training, resources and consultant support provided by NLS and NNS have raised the quality of teaching practice. Evidence about the extent of the changes in teaching practice is mixed, however, when one looks beyond

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the adoption of the structure and format of the literacy hour and daily mathematics lesson. For NLS and NNS to succeed in the ways that Strategy leaders believe are possible, many teachers will need to be highly skilled and more knowledgeable about teaching literacy and mathematics than is currently the case. The Strategies have provided teaching resources and good quality training to thousands of teachers across the country, but many teachers have not yet had the sustained learning experiences necessary to develop a thorough understanding of the Strategies or of the best ways to teach literacy and mathematics to their pupils. Our data continue to show considerable disparity across teachers and schools in terms of knowledge, skill and understanding of the Strategies. The data indicate that for many teachers, gaps or weaknesses in subject knowledge or pedagogical understanding limit the extent to which they can make full use of the frameworks and resources of the Strategies.

We concluded in our second report that initial gains in achievement scores were largely a function of relatively straightforward but effective changes in teaching practice. The levelling off of Key Stage 2 results would seem to support this conclusion. Increasing the proportion of teachers who are experts at using the Strategies to improve pupil learning is the next step, one that the Strategies are addressing in a variety of ways. However, many teachers believe that the job is done, that they have the knowledge they need and have fully implemented the Strategies – a misconception that makes capacity building more challenging. In its eagerness to celebrate the early success of the Strategies, the government may also have added to this sense of there being little more to do, even though it has now committed funding for the Strategies through to 2006.

Embedding Accountability and Capacity Building

In the early implementation of the Strategies, pressure for compliance with central directives served to engage schools, pushing them to begin changing classroom practice. However, continuing this kind of accountability for too long may result in a culture of dependence, reducing professional autonomy. When the focus of the government has moved on (as it inevitably will), the responsibility for maintaining a focus on literacy and mathematics, together with a determination to strive for high standards and quality teaching, will need to be embedded in the culture of schools and LEAs.

Even with the Strategies' strong focus on building capacity, the magnitude of the task has meant that many teachers have had relatively little opportunity for the sustained professional development and consolidation that is needed. The challenge now is finding ways to embed accountability and capacity building in the culture of schools. Without such a shift, the momentum that the Strategies have created may be lost.

Central Direction and Local Initiative

In our second report, we said that central direction and support were required in the initial phase of the Strategy initiatives in order to bring about intended changes quickly and on a large scale. It is appropriate that this approach would be modified in the current phase of the initiative where the challenge is to maintain and deepen the early gains that have occurred. Where the Strategies were viewed initially as a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, Strategy leadership has responded with a message of greater flexibility in their implementation. The challenge is to continue to push toward conditions where LEAs,

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schools, and teachers have the capacity to adapt, solve problems and refine their practice, while remaining true to the principles underlying the Strategies. SEU must continue to monitor and address the differences that exist across authorities, while moving LEAs and schools toward greater ownership, commitment and expertise.

Manageability for LEAs and Schools

Throughout the four years of our study, we have heard concerns about increasing pressure and initiative overload for teachers and headteachers. Although there is considerable support for the Strategies in schools, our data confirm that they have added to teacher workload (already an issue) and contributed to feelings of being overwhelmed. Furthermore, it is difficult for schools to maintain their focus on key priorities in the face of what often appears to the schools as a constant series of new or reworked initiatives. It is important that government efforts to help schools deal with overload, pressure and undue stress continue to be a high priority, particularly when pressure for meeting ever higher targets is likely to continue. DfES needs to show how initiatives can overlap and complement each other, so reducing, rather than adding to, the task for schools. Minimising or ignoring the problem will have negative consequences not only on the performance of current teachers but also on the attractiveness of teaching as a profession.

Targets and Test Results

In the early implementation of the Strategies, the emphasis on Key Stage 2 tests and target setting focused attention on literacy and mathematics and helped to mobilise the system. The setting of such widely disseminated national targets provided an effective launch to NLS and NNS. However, targets and high stakes testing may have unintended negative consequences, such as narrowing the curriculum. From the data available to us, we conclude that the high political profile of the 2002 national targets probably skewed efforts in the direction of activities – some of them misinformed and counter-productive – that were intended to lead to increases in the one highly publicised score. Many teachers acknowledged considerable test preparation, especially in the term leading up to the national assessments. We caution that setting ever higher national targets may no longer serve to mobilise and motivate, particularly if schools and LEAs see the targets as unrealistic. We suggest a shift in emphasis to what might be termed "consolidation targets," challenging headteachers and teachers to maintain improvement and to address issues they identify as significant in their schools. More emphasis could also be placed, in public communication, on the varied data increasingly used in schools and LEAs to assess progress on a broader range of dimensions.

The Teaching Profession

While the government continues to reinforce primary school reforms and implements new approaches in secondary schools, work has intensified on modernising or remodelling the profession of teaching. Such changes are intended to address current and future difficulties in attracting and retaining teachers, particularly in the London area. More immediately, they address concerns about workload, a topic that has been attracting considerable attention and debate that emerged from our data as well.

Recent DfES proposals have included initiatives to deal with recruitment, initial teacher training, support for newly qualified

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teachers, teacher compensation and performance appraisal, as well as leadership development. The focus is on improving the working conditions of teachers through reductions in paper work, increased time for planning and greater use of classroom assistants, all changes intended to reduce workload and raise teacher morale. Such policies, if successful, will strengthen efforts to improve literacy and mathematics teaching as well as addressing more general issues related to the profession.

Beyond the School

The government is well aware of the importance of involving parents in efforts to improve pupil learning. At the beginning of the Strategies, parallel programmes (the National Year of Reading and Maths Year 2000) were launched to encourage parents to help strengthen their children's literacy and mathematics skills. Family literacy and numeracy programmes have been funded as well to help parents improve their own skills. In spite of these efforts, the potential contribution of parents to their children's learning has not been realised. At the school level, headteachers and teachers try to engage parents, but with varying degrees of success. Schools in disadvantaged communities report particular difficulties, perhaps related to some parents' own ambivalence towards school, their lack of conviction that education will improve their children's lives, and the overwhelming pressures many families in these communities face.

Pupil outcomes are shaped by many factors outside of the school. In fact, the relationship between socio-economic status and educational achievement is recognised as one of the most stable relationships in educational research. As is appropriate, the main focus through NLS and NNS has been on the school – what schools can do to improve pupil learning through improved teaching practice. To close the gap between high and low performing children, however, may require more attention to out-of-school influences on pupil attainment. If this is the case, government efforts to strengthen connections between education and other policy areas that support families and communities will be crucial.

Conclusions

The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies are ambitious large-scale reform initiatives that have been generally well implemented and well supported by schools. Although the 2002 targets were not reached, there have been indications of improved teaching practice and pupil learning, as well as a substantial narrowing of the gap between the most and least successful schools and LEAs. Our data show that elements of the Strategies appear in virtually all classrooms, but that there is considerable disparity across teachers in subject knowledge, pedagogical skill and the understanding of NLS and NNS. Although the Strategies have made a good beginning in a relatively short period of time, the intended changes in teaching and learning have not yet been fully realised.

After four years, many see NLS and NNS as needing to be re-energised; the early momentum and excitement have lessened and a new boost would be helpful. The next phase in the evolution of the Strategies and the improvement of literacy and mathematics teaching is crucial if improvement is to be sustained. Such continuing improvement will require not only greater individual capacity in headteachers and teachers, but also greater organisational capacity in schools and LEAs. In the long run, we believe that the commitment to collective capacity building is the most promising direction for addressing the challenges of the future.

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